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ABSTRACT

In view of recent public demands for the establishment of minimum competency standards in a number of areas, including oral communication skills, and in view of classroom teachers' frequently inadequate training in speech communication, speech communication teachers have the responsibility of organizing and implementing oral communication competency inservice workshops for teachers and administrators in their districts. Speech communication teachers have the training both to assist educational administrators in functioning as group leaders and to assist teachers in developing more effective interactional skills. In organizing oral communication competency workshops, speech communication teachers should first identify potential areas of inservice training, after which they should explore and use whatever avenues seem most effective in setting up opportunities for workshops. In implementing workshops, teachers should keep in mind six general guidelines: begin with a specified and clearly stated objective, establish a time line, use a warm-up activity, provide for continuing resources, plan resources carefully, and provide for evaluation. (GT)

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ORGANIZING AND IMPLEMENTING AN
ORAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY WORKSHOP

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Organizing and Implementing an
Oral Communication Competency Workshop

Traditionally and historically, the role of the Speech Communication teacher in grades K-12 has been rather rigidly perceived by both the teacher and the administration of public schools. Rarely, if ever, are teachers hired specifically to teach speech communication below the seventh grade, and the general role of the secondary speech communication teacher is oriented strictly to classroom instruction of pupils. Occasionally below the senior high school level and usually at the senior high school level a competitive program is also considered to be part of the teacher's responsibilities. This strict role conception of the speech communication teacher is hardly a commentary on that discipline, however for the same kind of role perception operates for virtually every other instructor in grades K-12. It is the position of this author that recent changes in the educational environment, in the societal setting in which public schools are embedded, and in the focus of education itself have combined not only to encourage but to mandate the expansion of the role of the K-12 speech communication teacher.

Public education has moved into an era of accountability, with increasing pressure from the publics served by schools to "produce results." In the wake of that pressure, numbers of state legislatures, state education agencies, and local school districts have set up minimum competencies expected for the high school graduate. In response to the apparent intention of most of these agencies to include oral communication skills, the SCA appointed, through the

Educational Policies Board, a task force during 1977-78 to recommend minimal speaking and listening skills. Out of the work of that task force came the publication entitled SCA Guidelines for Minimal Competencies in Speaking and Listening for High School Graduates.

Closely related to the work of the task force was the previous work done under an SCA project, National Project on Speech Communication Competencies, directed by our current president, Dr. Ron R. Allen. This project resulted in the TRIP booklets, Development of Functional Communication Competencies: Pre-K - Grade 6 and Development of Functional Communication Competencies: Grades 7-12, both published in April, 1977 by ERIC. Together, these establish a taxonomy of communication and present both a challenge and an unprecedented opportunity to the speech communication teacher.

Although a large number of the states which have codified minimum competencies have included communication skills among them, very few states require speech communication credits for graduation. A survey conducted by this author in 1978 revealed that only four states of the thirty-two responding to the survey have a speech communication graduation requirement. The inescapable conclusion would seem to be that people in the English classroom or in the language arts classroom who may have little or no training in speech communication are being charged with the responsibility of moving students toward the acquisition of oral communication competencies. Although we might decry such a development, we are presented, nonetheless, with the responsibility to serve in our respective districts as resource persons, and should make every effort to utilize our training to enrich classrooms and teachers in oral communication skills.

Certainly the move toward minimum competencies is opening up areas of specific need for which the speech communication teacher has unique skills. However, the entire emphasis on accountability and the demand from the public for efficiency in the classroom has also revealed that the very people on whom the responsibility for supervising and training teachers has been placed are badly in need of supervision and training themselves. A recent study published in May of 1979 in Educational Leadership revealed that departmental chairpersons sampled in Cook, Lake, and DuPage counties in Illinois perceived themselves as having very important job tasks for which they were not competent. The revealing and exciting thing for the speech communication teacher is to look at the tasks which emerged in that study. Department heads indicated a need for more competence in "being able to lead groups . . . in discussions, presentations, training sessions . . . being able to work through conflict situations . . . involving role conflict, value conflict, . . . and interpersonal conflict. . . .conducting personal interviews. . . being able to lead through nondirective feedback techniques. . ."1 Current public climate demands strong educational leadership; educational leaders are demanding training for greater competency in tasks with which the speech communication teacher can assist.

Not only is good teaching the product of the knowledge and competencies which a teacher possesses, it is also, according to Arthur W. Combs, Distinguished Professor at the University of Northern Colorado, a product of perceptions which teachers hold about themselves and other with whom they interact. Based on a series of research studies at the Universities of Florida, Northern Colorado, and Massachusetts, Dr. Combs concluded that good teachers are "empathic, open, communicative, facilitating, and positive."2 These are not

necessarily innate personality traits, but rather, according to this author's research, can be taught, but should be taught by those trained in the competencies of communication and interaction.

The speech communication teacher, then, holds the key to several basic needs in public education in the 1980's. Not as a professor of education at the local university, but as a colleague and peer within each school district. Although the three changes outlined here represent only a portion of the many changes that educators face, they should be sufficient to demonstrate the overwhelming need for speech communication teachers to organize and implement inservice workshops which focus on the development of communication competencies in teachers and administrators. This is a drastic departure from the usual pattern of inservice training which brings in an out-of-town consultant, an expert, or which utilizes central office administrative personnel to train teachers. Such approaches make very strange assumptions, as pointed out by Dr. Robert N. Bush, in his essay, "Curriculum-Proof Teachers: Who Does What to Whom?" He says, "It assumes that a teacher is not a trained expert. This is an increasingly erroneous idea . . . This misconception must be routed from our plans for in-service education. A sounder conception is that of experts working together to advance their own expertness."³ Speaking on this same philosophical view of in-service education, Dr. Philip W. Jackson remarked that "If . . . the task is to facilitate normal development, the role of the outside expert becomes ambiguous."⁴ The point that is important is that as has already been demonstrated, issues and needs exist in public education today which well trained speech communication teachers are equipped to address. Recent thinking and research has shown that teachers respond well to peer training,⁵ and thus, the

role of the K-12 speech communication teacher can become vital to meeting in-service training needs of the school district.

The question then is how to go about the process of organizing and implementing oral communication competency workshops. Since this paper has explored three major areas in which the speech communication teacher has training and in which school districts have been shown to have needs, the outline of the methods here will be general and descriptive rather than specific and prescriptive.

Initially, the speech communication teacher must begin with an assessment of the needs which exist in the specific district in which that teacher resides. Obvious places to look are in the curriculum guides, accreditation goals, and state adopted competencies which impinge on and structure the teaching which should be occurring in the district. If, for example, the Language Arts Curriculum Guide for a district contains objectives which relate to oral communication at grade levels below which a speech communication teacher is employed, then a need exists for in-service training which will equip those language arts teachers to develop those oral communication competencies. If the accreditation goals of the district include upgrading the work of departmental heads, then an area of in-service needs is identified. The essential element which must occur is that the speech communication teacher approach and view teaching practices and educational goals within the district from the perspective of an expert with something important to offer, and then that an assessment from that perspective be made of what can be done.

Once the potential area or areas of in-service training are identified, the next step is to make those who are in charge of

in-service education in the district aware of the need and of the speech communication teacher's willingness and ability to provide in-service. This may be done very easily in an open and communicative district. It may be difficult to do in a district with a closed system, lacking in effective feedback loops. The speech communication teacher will, then, need to explore and utilize whatever avenues seem most effective in setting up opportunities for workshops.

At the point in time when a workshop has been scheduled, the implementation process is comparable to that of designing any well structured plan for teaching. Some general guidelines are:

1. Begin with a specified and clearly stated objective.

It is not enough to have assessed the needs and formulated a general idea of what the workshop or series of workshops will accomplish. Research has indicated that in-service training programs must be related to specific issues and that teachers must be fully cognizant of the specific objectives for the session⁶ if maximum transfer is to occur. The objective of the workshop might be stated as: "At the conclusion of the three hour work session, the teacher will be able to utilize and design teaching strategies which will build the ability of the teachers students to listen effectively to spoken English." Or, if the district has decided to apply the minimal competencies in its vocational training program, a workshop for the vocational and work study teachers might have as its objective: "At the conclusion of the three day workshop, the teachers will have the skills and the materials for training students in occupational applications of competencies for oral communication." Whatever the focus group, there must be a clearly defined objective for the workshop.

2. A time line should be established. The in-service workshop should have a series of segmented activity blocks which allow the teacher participants varied learning activities. A very important communication variable to keep in mind during the planning stages is the natural antipathy with which most teachers approach an in-service session, regardless of its worth or their apparent need for the training. Consequently, the activities which are planned should promote maximum involvement, activities of an experiential type, and demonstrations and modeling which will be on target with the objectives for the session.

3. Use a Warm-up activity. One of the early types of activities which should be used is "an unfreezing or start-up activity."⁷ Lippitt and Fox, in their in-depth study of effective classroom learning, suggest that concentrated interpersonal and group activity must precede any other activity in the session.⁸

4. Provide for continuing resources. Along with the use of varied learning activities, there should be provision made for easy retrieval and utilization of resources. The value of using the speech communication teacher within the local district is the availability of that individual to continue the in-service as a resource person, and to offer follow-up session which can reinforce the teaching of the original session. Much has been written about the lack of lasting impact from "one shot" workshops by out-of-town consultants.⁹ If the individual with the expertise is also available for continuing consultation and assistance, the learning which occurs should also be continuing.

5. Plan resources carefully. The resources which will be needed for the workshop must be planned for carefully and must be appropriate to the needs of the group in attendance. If the focus of the workshop is a group of elementary teachers who will be respon-

sible for building oral communication competencies in their students, then certainly there should be not only a discussion of the competencies, and an actual experiential set of activities dealing with those competencies, but there should also be specific activities designed for that age group which can be carefully looked at in the session so that the elementary teachers not only understand what to do with their students, but they also understand why these activities are to be used.

There is no lack of readily available materials for use in any in-service workshop geared at developing the abilities of teachers to meet oral communication competencies, geared at training teachers in empathic and facilitative classroom behavior, or geared at assisting department heads in increasing competencies in supervisory leadership. Although other disciplines are adopting and publishing many of these, the great majority were developed by the speech communication field. Consequently, when conducting the workshop, do not assume that a work or a visual aid which is very familiar to the speech communication teacher will also be familiar to the participants.

6. Provide for evaluation. Finally, there must be provision for evaluation of the session. This does not refer to the standard, "Check here if you like this" form which is frequently used in in-service evaluation. The type of evaluation needed is one which will be based on interaction between the participants and the facilitator in which the objectives for the session are examined in the light of three questions: (1) which of the objectives did we accomplish, (2) What additional work needs to be done for completion? (3) What new objectives have been suggested by this session which now need to be met?

There is a real need for meaningful in-service training in public schools. Much of the literature of supervision contains recommendations such as that made by Dr. Louis Fischer:

Instead of colleges and other outside agencies offering courses or suggesting workshops and institutes, increasingly the responsibility for professional growth should be shifted to the individual practitioners. They must be involved in . . . charting their directions of growth.¹¹

Or perhaps the idea was more succinctly stated by Lippitt and Fox:

If sufficient leadership for a wide variety and continuing sequence of in-service education activities is to be provided, much of it will need to come from within the local school system.¹²

If speech communication teachers are serious about the importance of oral communication competencies, they must be a part of that leadership within their own school districts. The need exists; the speech communication teacher has the ability and training to meet the need. More importantly, as a professional educator, the speech communication teacher has the responsibility to broaden his or her role through use of the unique skills possessed by one trained and competent in oral communication.

FOOTNOTES

¹Frances Weaver and Jeffry Gordon, "Staff Development Needs of Department Heads," Educational Leadership, May, 1979 (Vol. 36, No. 8), page 579-580.

²Arthur W. Combs, "Teacher Education: The Person in the Process," Educational Leadership, April, 1978 (Vol. 35, No. 7), page 558.

³Robert N. Bush, "Curriculum-Proof Teachers: Who Does What to Whom," in Improving In-Service Education, ed. Louis J. Rubin, (Allyn and Bacon: Boston, 1971), page 50.

⁴Philip W. Jackson, "Old Dogs and New Tricks: Observations On the Continuing Education of Teachers," in Improving In-Service Education, ed. Louis J. Rubin, (Allyn and Bacon: Boston, 1971), page 26.

⁵Dwight W. Allen, "In-Service Teacher Training: A Modest Proposal," in Improving In-Service Education, ed. Louis J. Rubin, (Allyn and Bacon: Boston, 1971), page 130.

⁶Bush, p. 64.

⁷Ronald Lippitt and Robert Fox, "Development and Maintenance of Effective Classroom Learning," in Improving In-Service Education, ed. Louis J. Rubin, (Allyn and Bacon: Boston, 1971), p. 151.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Jackson, p. 36.

¹⁰Louis Fischer, "In-Service Education: An Immodest Proposal," in Improving In-Service Education, ed. Louis J. Rubin, (Allyn and Bacon: Boston, 1971), page 241.

¹¹Lippitt and Fox, p. 147.